



making your drums feel clean and happy

by Robert Saydlowski

Drums, like any other musical instrument, must be kept up in good condition in order to repay you with good sound and performance. The following should be of some help to percussion people...

Number one priority for all drums is CASES. All of us drummers know how rough our fellow band members and roadies can be on drums; "Drums are meant to be beat on, so..." "Good protection for your instrument is a must. Would your guitarist keep his treasured Strat or Les Paul in a soft guitar cover ??? On the road, skycaps and other airline people throw band equipment around like anything. Anvil makes excellent road cases — even though they're expensive, they are well worth the money and nothing can kill them except

maybe being run over by an occasional steamroller. Fibre cases are fine for local bands. All cases should be tight enough to prevent excessive humidity from seeping in, and if possible, lined with foam rubber on the inside to keep the drum from bouncing around against the hard corners of the case. Your cases should also be stencilled with either the band's name or your own name and address to prevent loss or mix-up. Special care must be taken with metal drums. A deep scratch can expose the steel underlayer to the air and cause oxidation.

Carrying spare parts is also a very good idea. Wing nuts and screws can be easily dropped from strands, snare strands can be popped, bolts can strip, lug nuts can come loose, heads can break, etc. Billy Cobham once

said that his road crew carries enough parts to be able to build a kit on the road if necessary. If your group is doing a week-long engagement in some small town that's miles and miles away from a music store of any type, and something breaks the first night, then you're stuck. Don't let this happen to you!!

Now on to the nitty-gritty of maintenance...

Everything gets dirty sometime or another, so when cleaning the finish on your drums, abrasive compounds or rough polishing cloths should be avoided. Instead, the shell should be cleaned with a mild detergent such as a glass cleaner. But don't use the type that comes in an aerosol propellant. This may damage the finish. Some shells even clean nicely by rubbing with a wet finger.

The tension screws used to tighten the drumhead should be removed and relubricated about twice a year. All accumulated grit and dirt should be removed from the threads. The screws should be soaked in kerosene, wiped dry, and relubricated with a grease compound such as petroleum jelly. An easier and quicker way if time is important, is to use Latin Percussion's Lug-Lube which does practically the same job.

Drumheads should be cleaned periodically because the accumulated grime will affect the tonal quality. Dirt can be removed effectively with a damp cloth and a light application of scouring powder. When the head is clean, it should be wiped with a clean, dry cloth. Drumheads should be cleaned about every three months

depending on use. After a period of time, the batter head will lose its coated surface and the transparent film will be exposed. At this point, the head should generally be replaced. However, Ludwig makes a coating material that can be sprayed onto the head to renew the frosted surface. Drumstick impressions or dents can also be removed since they, too, can affect tone quality. Removing these dents is simple, but must be done carefully. Hold a heat source such as a lit cigarette about 1/8" above the drumhead. Gently blow on the tip so the heat will contact the impression. If done carefully, the dent will be removed and the original tone of the head restored.

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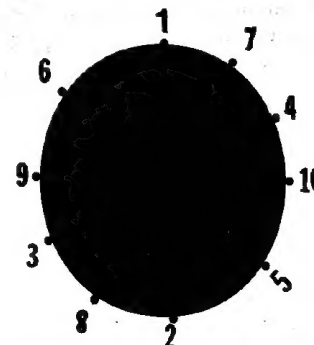
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In the case of an internal drum repair, a note should be made as to where the drumhead label is in relation to one of the drum lugs. The sound of the drum will change if the head is not placed back in exactly the same position, especially if the head has been mated to the shell for a while. If this seating is disturbed, the drumhead will have to reseal itself and a different sound will result. It's preferable to remove the bottom head to do any work on the drum shell — the sound of the drum won't be disturbed. (For a bass drum repair, the front head should be removed.) Before replacing the head, rub some paraffin wax around the edge of the shell where the head will make contact. This will make the drumhead tension easier and seat smoother once it's in place. If possible, the front bass drum head should not be taken off for life performance. This will structurally weaken the shell because of the weight of the tomtoms. A round hole can be cut in the bass drum head to achieve the same sound and projection of an open front.

Drumheads are available in a variety of sizes, weights and styles. Each has its own characteristics and can be intermixed on the same drum. Generally, the sound of a coated head is of the shortest duration, longer with a smooth-white head, and longest with a transparent head. Batter heads range from the Diplomat weight (thinnest) to the Ambassador weight (medium thickness) and up to the Emperor weight (two ply, used primarily for marching drums, but effective in certain rock situations.) Remo

makes six different types of drumheads: coated batter, snare side, transparent, Controlled Sound, smooth white, and FiberSkyn. Controlled Sound heads are fairly new on the market. A circular patch is laminated to the top center of the head which doubles the thickness of the head in the area of impact. C.S. heads are useful in controlling unwanted overtones. Canasonic heads claim to have virtually no overtones whatsoever, and are primarily effective in studio applications. Bass drum heads are generally available in only one or two thicknesses and also in C.S. and FiberSkyn. Ludwig makes a C.S. head with a mirrored patch. Evans manufactures two-ply drum heads filled with hydraulic oil and they also make heads with full mirrored coatings. (How's that, Egotists??!!) After experimentation, you'll find the type that is best suited to your style of playing. With so many types of heads to choose from, it *may* take a few years!

Knowing how to tune a percussion instrument properly is by far the most important. The proper procedure must be followed when tuning a drumhead. This is shown in the diagram. Partially tighten screw #1, then move to the opposite side and partially tighten screw #2. Alternately strike the drum 1" from screw #1 and #2 and compare the sound; they should be the same. Now, partially tighten screws #3 and #4; again striking the drum 1" from the tension screw. Compare the sound for all four positions. Continue in this manner until all tension screws have been tightened equally and the pitch is the




same at each screw. Expect the head to stretch some (like new guitar strings), so the drum may have to be re-tuned.

Technically, any dampening (muffling) should be done from the outside. The internal tone controls press up as they are tightened which chokes the head. The natural movement of a head is up and down, so if you dampen it from the outside, the head will move naturally. Rogers just started making a muffler that clips on to the outside of the drum rim and are using them on all their Memriloc kits.

Last, but certainly not least, are the cymbals. Heavy abrasives should never be used to clean cymbals. Lots of companies manufacture a special cymbal cleaner — the best being Zildjian's liquid cleaner and Buckaroo solid cleaner. Even jewelers' rouge works fine. Also, buffing wheels should never be used. Excessive heat will take the temper out of the cymbal and leave it full of "dead" spots. Cymbals, like drumheads, are subjected to a lot of strain by being directly struck, which sometimes causes cracking or chipping. A small crack in the edge of a cymbal that's

1/2" or less can be ground out on a grinding wheel. Drilling holes at the edge of a crack or grinding out a "V" are only temporary measures that will stop further cracking for only a short time. Anything larger than 1/2" cannot be ground out without changing the tone of the cymbal for worse. To minimize cracking: 1) use a cymbal bag or separate fibre case to protect your cymbals; 2) keep wing nuts and washers fairly loose in order that the cymbal vibrates freely and is not choked; 3) avoid direct blows to the cymbal; 4) select cymbals big enough to do the job — no matter how well they are made, overworked small cymbals will be subject to early breakage.

Your instrument can only give you good performance if you take care of it properly. Don't forget. . . your drums make you money and what average musician can afford a new drum kit every year? 

Robert Saydlowski is a professional drummer living in Pittsfield, Massachusetts and is currently playing with the Zarvis-Allen Band.